"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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NATURE SPEAKS OF GOD

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"The invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen; being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead." Rom. 1:20

Paul in this great text rebukes the people of the world, who without the Bible would turn the beauty and divine functions of life and nature into purposes of sin and selfishness. He says, "....they are without excuse" as long as nature speaks to us in the language of law, order, beauty, and purposefulness. Who among us could think unkindly of his neighbor or commit cruelty in the beauty and fragrance of a flower garden. Most of us would be wiser, as well as more gracious, if we took more time to think amidst the glory of a rising sun or in facing the challenging voice and beauty of a thunder storm!

There is a call to worship in the voice of nature to all of us. The majesty of the mountains, the music of the winds in the forest, waving fields of grain, planting the seed in springtime, trees laden with fruit of many colors and deliciousness of flavor, cattle or sheep in green pastures, a rose or a lily--all of these and many other things of life, beauty, and usefulness, stir us to worship and appreciation of the Father of all the earth. A college sophomore asked me for a conference. She said, "I am afraid I am not very religious. I just heard a sermon on prayer and am not moved to pray. I feel so much more like praying when I walk through the meadows in the morning to school." Was she lacking the spirit of worship or religion? We think not. She was a thoughtful country girl whose life was closely related to the life of the universe about her and she was having some difficulty in adjusting to the abstractions of truth apart from the life she knew so well. A Japanese Christian in America said, "I go with you to church for intellectual stimulus and fellowship, but when I want to worship I walk in the woods or by the stream." We should do all we can to maintain this appreciation of God in the many things about us that He has made and planned for our learning.

When Jesus was among men on the earth, He found His texts and subjects largely in the facts and experiences of men and nature. His profoundest truth He made plain with the simplest facts of daily experience. We all remember the stories of the good shepherd, the good Samaritan, the vine and the branches, the sower, and many others. The deepest truths still lie in the simple meaning of these stories. In other words there is so much of the deep truths, of the wisdom and love of God in this universe when in contact

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with it, that we never cease to be enlightened in the deeper things of the mind and spirit which make God become increasingly divine and wonderful.

It is difficult to keep the right perspective and philosophy of life too far from the voice of God in nature. Its struggles, progress through sacrifice, life out of death, processes of growth, the demand for cooperation and change, the necessity for law and obedience thereto--all these facts of nature are daily reminders to the rural dweller that he may find his way into the life that is abundant and abides. The urban environment tends toward superficiality, individualism, immediacy, speed, and materialism.

The things we might learn about God in nature are innumerable. Five of them we shall mention briefly in this message. Think of the beauty of God as revealed in nature. The whole earth is filled with His glory. From the majesty of the rising sun to a tiny crocus in the springtime there is beauty indescribable. The symmetry of a tree, the babbling of a brook, the orderly harvest from the springtime's sowing are only a few of the subjects in nature that have inspired poets and artists through the years. A metropolitan newspaper some years ago was asked by one of its readers for the most beautiful line of poetry in the English language. The editor acknowledged the difficulty of answering such a request, but ventured the following simple lines of rural beauty:

"Upon the valley's lap, the dewy morning throws
A thousand pearly drops to wake a single rose."

Or who has not adjusted his sense of values after reading the significant lines of Joyce Kilmer when he sings:

"Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree."

One of the great differences between Christianity and other religions is in this divine concept of beauty as revealed in Christ. Other religions through fear have associated God with the disturbing elements of life. As a result they are inclined to have a complex of fear, and worship to appease the hate and opposition of their gods. No man can study the cooperation and response of nature to meet man's need, and continue to have such a feeling about the God of our universe. Of course the beauty of God far exceeds the many notions we have about the modern use of that word. The modern use of beauty has in it too much of the superficial, sensual, and mechanical to be used too freely in describing the divine loveliness.

Again nature demonstrates daily the providence of God. One marvels at the hungers of men and their counterpart in nature. How need and supply are so wonderfully adjusted and provided for. The universal thirst for water finds it provided by nature somewhere not too far away. The scattered nations have always been a challenge to our curiosity for discovery. This same instinct will probably bring new worlds into our universe of the future. Our

social instincts must ultimately make friends of peoples now feared or unknown. But the simple things before us every day--water in which ducks can swim, grass for animals who require it, birds that make the air a means of migration, apples that fall to the ground and not upwards, eyes arranged that we can see in the direction in which we walk, and protected as they are from danger and hundreds of other things too numerous to mention. Of course, there are those who want to argue how cometh those things, and "whether the egg or the chicken was first." But most of us are happy those things are here, and rejoice in their lessons of wisdom about God, so that we can face unafraid all that lies beyond our sight. We rejoice that both nature and the gospel teach that "all things work together for good to those who love the Lord"; also, "....if it were not so, I would have told you." All nature verifies this testimony.

Recently we have been impressed with the lessons nature teaches us on the redemption of God. This is the one fine fact in the hope of men and the heart of our gospel about which there is much said and on which there is yet much desired for further knowledge. When one studies the persistence of nature to overcome death, we have at least some fine things to think about. If by accident, we remove a bit of skin from the body, nature does her best to restore it. If a bone is broken, nature reunites the rupture. In fact, it is reported by good doctors that probably eighty per cent of all healable diseases would recover without a physician's assistance. All of which only shows nature's struggle to keep us from disintegration.

We find the same truth in the forest and in the soil. We may take from the soil fruitful harvests, but nature has provided legumes and other organic matter to maintain its fertility. Soil erosion is not only a crime against the soil and future generations, but it is also one against the God of nature who has so wisely provided that it should not be. Jesus, Himself, almost lost patience with His disciples in their worry and anxiety about life and its needs. Did He not say, "....if God so clothe the grass of the field, shall He not much more clothe you?" Most of our blunders, fears, and anxiety are without foundation, and a sin against ourselves and the Father who has created us and sustains us. Nature and the gospel seem to agree that only a persistent turning from God to selfishness and sin can defeat His plan for the abiding life of His people.

Nature also teaches us the lesson of sacrifice in the world in which we live. This is the one we too often refuse to acknowledge and therefore many rebel against sacrifice as having a place in the plan of divine grace. But the eternal truth of Jesus' statement, "except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone," is the law of God's universe and written across every field of golden grain and speaks to us amid the fragrance and beauty of the flowers.

Human experience verifies this same inevitable fact. The food we eat, the clothing we wear, the salaries and income we get, all come from the experiences of life that are perpetually fertilized by the sacrifice of toil, struggle and death upon the part of the animal or vegetable kingdoms. Char-

acter only grows where the lower things that perish are sacrificed for the higher good. Ennobling lives--like fields of grain--are the fruit of precious seed and loving cultivation. Two mothers were in conversation. The one had two unusual daughters. The other mother said, "I would give all that I have if I had two girls like yours." The other one, after a bit of blushing and a moment's thoughtfulness, replied quietly, "Really, that is about what it costs."

Of course, sacrifice of itself has little value; it is usually the unconscious radiance of those whose eyes and hearts are fixed on worthier things. A farmer sows precious seed in the hope of harvest. The athlete forgets the discipline of training in the joy of the game. A mother's sleepless nights with her child are but God's way of planting the seeds of character and devotion into another life. Life gives little hope for those who have no vision or goal that would lead them through sacrifice to attain it.

Both nature and experience teach us that in any plan of redemption we are sure to find the symbol of sacrifice. And back of that sacrifice must be a purpose worthy of the profoundest wisdom and the divinest love. The Cross of Calvary is not an accident. Neither is it contrary to the love of God. But on the other hand it is the climax of that love, for "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Back of the cross lies the successful philosophy of life, because it is born out of the heart of God.

Again the world we live in bears testimony to the triumphs of patient love. Nature is very jealous of its many secrets. Only those who love flowers will be able to see their real beauty and learn the secrets of color and fragrance. Those who love the soil shall find in it a friendship that will share bounteous gifts and teach lessons of the mysteries and wisdom of God. Only those who love nature are worthy and capable of her potential powers and only to these will she reveal herself. This is true of our daily task. As long as our job is on the limited hour basis, there is likely to be little joy or progress. But when we love it enough to spend a few extra minutes studying its secrets and possibilities, then we shall be on the sure way to its joyful mastery and management. Horses and pigs respond likewise. A bit of gentleness to the cow will increase the flow of milk! All the world needs today is for folks to fall in love with their job, their surroundings and their fellowmen. Then work that is drudgery will yield the joy of a game. Field and garden will be laboratories revealing the secrets of the universe, and the folks we once feared will become abiding friends along life's way.

When we think of the possibilities of a heart that loves and a life that shares, as reflected in God's universe, we would expect that when He revealed Himself in the Man of Galilee, He would be the embodiment of this mysterious grace and power. This is why He is the only character that is bidding for the heart of the world. In Him alone can we solve its problems. This makes His redemption perfect and complete to all who believe. His unselfishness, His ministry among the needy and suffering, His deep insight into the things that matter, His keen judgment of men with their inner urges of fear and hope, His mastery of the things of the flesh, His patience with the lowly and ignorant, and His rebuke to superficial and insincere formality make Him "the Desire of all nations," the Hope of the world, the Son of God, our Lord and Redeemer!

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